# Protected

## THE DANGERS OF A SENTIMENTAL NIGHT IN THE TAJ MAHAL BY MOONLIGHT

By Margaret Busbee Shipp

"JUST how far Mrs. Kindersley went" was a matter which obviously concerned nobody so much as it concerned her husband; but as he seemed indifferent to her successive affairs, it was evident that there was no great harm in them.

The men were prone to champion her. As they often said, there really was very little for an Englishwoman to do with her time in Agra, or at a hill station in the summer. She was deucedly attractive, too. Even India had not hurt her complexion, and there was something about her so—so feminine—no, that wasn't exactly the right word.

Perhaps "acquiescent" was as near it as the language affords. Underneath her grace, her subtle sympathy, there was a deep acquiescence. A man realized—when she wanted him to realize it, not before—that she had no barriers strong enough to put up against his splendid, conquering will. Why, she was as helpless as a fluttering white butterfly caught between two powerful hands!

She had another quality that might have played havoc in the game of hearts which she loved—a sense of humor. Of course, an affair must take itself quite seriously to give out its real savor; so the humor in her was held in abeyance save to her husband, who chanced to be of an ironic turn of mind.

Love had long since left Kindersley, a tired-looking man with a keen flair for his work; but his wife still interested him and never bored him, and their home was always inviting.

"Positively se-duc-tive, that drawing-room!" an enemy of Mrs. Kindersley's had said; but one cannot accept without reservations the testimony of a woman with a cast in one eye.

Mrs. Kindersley's eyes were gentian blue, smeared in with the hard-working dirty finger, so deep were the shadows beneath and so long were the dark lashes. Her hair was of the palest shade of gold, and, to men grown accustomed to looking at bobbed heads, its soft abundance seemed very feminine.

Dick Reade thought so, too. He admired its softness, he wondered if there was not a faint perfume about it. Sometimes, as one danced with her, there came the barest hint of a delicious fragrance, gone as soon as imagined.

Reade had come over from the United States on business for his firm, an important matter which necessitated his remaining for several months in India. For his purpose Agra was better than Delhi, as he had to play a waiting game in regard to certain concessions, and in Agra one could keep out of the seething intrigues of the capital. This isn't an account of his business success. As a matter of fact, he was only partially successful; but to Mrs. Kindersley he was a godsend.

The season had promised to be dull. Most of the attractive men around had already been singed at her flame. A few minutes ago she was the fluttering butterfly, and now she is the flame itself—which shows the diverse aspects of a fascinating woman!

Upon a scene grown familiar to the point of monotony there entered the stranger, a prosperous, good-looking American — her very first American — an agreeable companion on her daily horseback rides, a good dancer, and a generous spender, according to the custom of his country.


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Quite by chance, that morning, he had run across her in one of the bewitching shops of Agra. She was wistfully turning over a buckle which had been worn on a maharajah's sleeve a hundred years before, watching the light catch its emeralds, its small fiery rubies, and its pale tourmalines. She appealed to Dick Reade in her pretty way:

"The wretch wants the most frightful sum for this! He knows how stupid I am about such things—I simply cannot bargain. Do see if you can make him offer it to me for less!"

Reade and the shopkeeper managed to come to terms.

"I think it's rather barbaric. You really like that mixture of precious and semi-precious stones?" He dropped it into her hand. "Here's your bauble, lovely lady. Please keep it to remember our morning canters!"

She knew how to thank a man, the lovely lady. Her hands closed together over the buckle, but her blue eyes lifted to his and suffused with a sudden mist, as if nothing mattered in the heavens above or the earth beneath save that the morning rides were nearly over.

Unfortunately, Reade was lighting a cigarette and missed the delicacy of it. She had to fall back on words—clumsy tools, at best; yet he seemed boyishly gratified by her thanks, even though he waved them aside.

"Why, that's nothing—nothing, after all you've done for me here, making me at home in your home. You've *made* Agra for me, you and Kindersley, with your wonderful kindness."

Mrs. Kindersley sighed inaudibly. The buckle was an exquisite thing, of course, though Reade himself did not realize what a find it was; but it wasn't going to be especially stimulating to have this man in love with her.

"Don't forget our engagement to-night," she murmured, as he put her in her smart carriage. The native coachman and footman wore spotless white with red turbans and sashes. "You're coming to dinner first, of course?"

"No—I'm sorry, but I have to meet a man at my hotel. The first possible moment I can get away from him—"

She smiled in mock dismay.

"No earlier?"

He laughed back:

"Yes, much earlier than possible. I'll think about you and the Taj, and achieve the impossible!"

## II

THE moon was high when the two entered the great North Gate. Through the farther arch they could see the tomb—perfect as a pearl.

Mrs. Kindersley shivered slightly. With how many men had she come to gaze at this cool perfection in marble? How many men, in the presence of that memorial to love, had told her of their adoration? Yet somehow to-night she shivered, recalling only the mute misery in the face of an English lad, his stumbling, passionate words, his despair when she had refused to "fly with him to the ends of the world, to some isle in the far-off seas!"

Poor boy, hardly able to support himself, yet expecting her to give up all the security of her life and the comforts of her entourage for that mad flight with him! It was hardly her fault that he had begun to drink hard after her refusal, that now he was swallowed up somewhere in the darker byways of the East. She had not thought of him for several years. Curious, how the flooding beauty of the moonlit world brought him back to her, and his poetic joy in it all!

With an effort she recalled herself to the present.

"Shall we go to the little upper gallery of the gate? We'll be alone there, and it's my favorite view, for we are far enough away to see it, pools and all, as a single picture."

The custodian salaamed over his agreeable tip, and, holding a lantern to guide them, conducted them up the short flight of stairs to the open space facing the Taj Mahal. When he brought seats for them, Mrs. Kindersley said a few words in Hindustani—no one else was to be admitted. The man salaamed again, and left them.

Before them rose the marble shrine of the Exalted of the Palace, its minarets and dome white against the night-blue sky, mistily white in the moonlight. The dome was reflected in the pool below, but softly—a pearly ghost of a reflection. The tall, slender cypresses were black in the moonlight, like lines of mourning guardians. Afar gleamed the light of the lamp which always burns above the resting place of the little Persian wife of Shah Jehan.

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"Dead so long ago, but so dearly loved!" Mrs. Kindersley's exquisite voice was as tender as the note of a harp. "It makes one realize that death doesn't matter, if once in woman's life a man has given her a great love. It was in bringing his child into the world that she died. She had borne him many children." Her tone grew pensive, a little timid. Somehow she conveyed the impression that she was telling him of an emotion never before voiced. "Perhaps it was the happiest way for her to die—the supreme expression of her love, as this tomb was of his. The man's love expressed itself in something tangible, visible to all the world. Perhaps in her heart for him, unspoken and unseen, there was erected something as beautiful as this!"

A slight sigh escaped her, and one slender hand slipped into his.

"It's rather wonderful—seeing this with *you,* Dick!"

There was a little pause before she brought out his name. All the warmth and fragrance and acquiescence of her seemed unfolding as the white flowers were unfolding to the night moths that fluttered in the garden beneath.

He grasped her hand warmly, firmly. It struck her with a queer sense of chill. He might have caught the hand of any comrade in just that friendly clasp. Then she glanced at his face and drew in her breath sharply.

It was going to be far more interesting than she had thought, far more than she had dreamed possible! Never—not even in the face of that eager boy who insistently thrust himself into her memory tonight—had she seen such tenderness. She had thought the American prosaic! It would prove less easy to deal with him than she had thought, but far more stimulating. Her pulses raced faster, but to gain time she found gentle words:

"You remember when Shah Jehan was dying, imprisoned at Agra Fort by his own rebellious son, his last prayer was granted—to be carried to the Jasmine Tower, where his dying eyes could look across the bend in the river to the shrine he had built for his beloved. Everything of beauty that could be wrought by the hand of man had been made for her tomb, with its marble screen as delicate as lace, and its jeweled flowers which cannot fade; yet to me the deepest significance comes from the simple design common to the Moslem tombs—*on the man's the pen box, on the woman's the slate.* That is as fitting and as true tonight as it was when Shah Jehan loved his Chosen of the Palace. A woman finds her deepest happiness in being the slate on which her lover, her master, her conqueror, writes as he will!"

She lifted her eyes to him, as if startled that she had betrayed too much; but he was still looking straight ahead at the Taj Mahal. His words came unevenly, and from the stumbling roughness of his tone she knew that she had never before heard him speak when he was deeply moved:

"Look at the way the night blots out everything but the beauty, the whiteness! Those domes are like great white bubbles—even those of the other gates. One can't see the sandstone of the gates—just the blurring trees, and those white bubbles against the sky, as if they're going to float off into the night. It makes me feel—feel as if I'd give my head to show this to my little Mary! You know I don't talk of myself and my own. I never could; but my little daughter—she's only five—is the most imaginative small soul—'fire and dew and delicate frost,' her mother says. She loves to blow soap bubbles. I never saw a kid with the same funny passion for them, and she'll tell me the destination of each one—quaint, fairy destinations; but she won't tell anybody but me. 'They're our secrets,' as she puts it. Since I've been away, my wife writes that Mary's bubbles have but one direction—she blows them all straight to me! This place is so enchanted that it brought back all my little girl's fancies, as if in a moment more those misty domes might float off in the air—might dissolve like Mary's bubbles!"

He broke off. His clasp tightened hard on Mrs. Kindersley's hand, and then he let it go.

"How wonderful you've been to a lonely man of another country! Some day I hope you'll come to mine and visit us. The unearthly loveliness here makes the homesickness almost more than one can bear. Thank God I'm leaving soon! Now I'm not going to say another word. I don't spill over like this more than once in a blue moon, lovely lady. Do you mind staying a little longer if I stop bleating and let you enjoy it in peace?"

"Well?" queried Kindersley, in his ironic drawl, when his wife returned home

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later. "Reade does not come in? Too overwhelmed by the Taj, presumably."

"Hugh, I don't lie to you, do I? I give you my word of honor that we've been looking at the Taj in the moonlight—actually *looking* at it, like two conscientious tourists! Truly, it's the first time I've ever seen it, under the same circumstances. It's not half bad in its way."

Kindersley lifted his eyebrows slightly as he inquired:

"Then I'm to conclude that the American proved impervious?"

She turned the matter over in her mind before she answered:

"Protected. The inventive Americans! He seemed to make invulnerable armor out of a child's soap bubbles!"